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ABSTRACT

This document, part of the lesson plan series, "Teaching with Historic Places," examines the role of rice farming in U.S. history. The lesson, which focuses upon the era of the Southern plantations, includes sections setting out student objectives and teaching activities, as well as notes on visiting the sites. There are subsections of the teaching activities portion entitled "Setting the Stage"; "Locating the Site"; "Determining the Facts"; and "Putting It All Together." The document includes two map exhibits, four photographs, and a diagram of a plantation. (SG)

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When Rice Was King

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Teaching with Historic Places

A program of the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places and the National Trust for Historic Preservation

When Rice Was King

BY FAY METCALF

The rice fields lie abandoned now, covered over with wild grasses that provide feasts for thousands of birds and, near the shoreline, haven for a few remaining river alligators. The rice fields were carved out of tidal swamps along coastal rivers by slaves brought to South Carolina from the West Indies and West Africa. With primitive tools, the slaves cleared the low-lying land of huge cypress and gum trees, and built canals, dikes, and trunks (small floodgates) that allowed the flooding and draining of the fields with the high and low tides. From the late 18th century to the Civil War, enslaved people planted, tended, and harvested the crops that made Georgetown County, South Carolina, the second largest rice producer in the world. For the slave owners, it was a period of great prosperity; for the slaves, it was a time of despair.

Textbooks tend to examine the antebellum South in connection with the rise of cotton culture. It is important, however, for students to understand that before "cotton was king," the plantation system had already been producing crops such as rice, indigo, and tobacco.

This lesson about the early plantation system is based on National Register of Historic Places registration files and other source materials on the rice culture of Georgetown County. Materials for students include (1) readings about life on an antebellum rice plantation and the layout of a representative plantation, (2) maps of the region, (3) a drawing indicating the layout of another plantation complex, and (4) photographs of a plantation.

Objectives for the Students

- To describe the complexity of large-scale, slave-worked agricultural enterprises.
- To explain the role that rice production played in the economy of the antebellum South.
- To analyze historic plantation sites for what they tell us about daily life in a particular era.
- To evaluate different sources of information relating to a particular historic place.
- To compare the rice-based economy of early South Carolina with the economic base of the students' own state.

Teaching Activities

Setting the Stage

Explain to the students that coastal South Carolina's fertile land and warm climate led many early European settlers to believe that a fortune could be made by planting the right crop. Along the many rivers that flowed to the Atlantic, planters experimented with sugar, indigo, tobacco, tropical fruits, and rice. Of these crops, rice grew best in the tidal swamp regions along the Waccamaw, Pee Dee, Black, and Sampit rivers, and rice provided the basis for a flourishing slave-worked plantation economy. From the 1750s to 1890, South Carolina was the nation's leading rice producer, with much of the production in Georgetown County.

The cultivation of rice required intensive labor. To the many early settlers who had come to South Carolina from Barbados where slaves worked the sugar plantations, the obvious labor force was African slaves. In 1680, four-fifths of South Carolina's population was white. By 1720 when a rice culture was being established, black slaves outnumbered white residents two to one; by 1740 slaves constituted nearly 90 percent of the population. Slave owners lived in large houses built to take advantage of prevailing breezes; the slaves lived in shacks. When the weather became unbearably hot, the owners left overseers in charge of their plantations and spent time at the nearby seashore or at their houses in the burgeoning city of Charleston; the slaves continued their daily fieldwork.

Chicora Wood, first established in the 1730s, was one of the most successful of Georgetown County's rice

plantations. Although the earliest surviving building on the land dates from 1819, the complex as a whole gives a good idea of what a typical 18th- or 19th-century plantation looked like.

Locating the Site

Provide the students with copies of the attached maps and ask them to answer the following questions:

a. Where is Georgetown County in relation to the rest of the state of South Carolina?

b. What do the locations of rice plantations seem to have in common?

c Where might crops have been sent for shipment to market?

d. Looking at Map Exhibit 2, where are swamps and wetlands found in relation to the rivers and roads? (Although these areas are not labeled as such, they can be located on the topographical map.)

e. What conclusions can you draw as to why Georgetown County became an important region for rice cultivation?

Determining the Facts

Rice Cultivation

Provide the students with copies of Reading 1. Since it is lengthy and contains some difficult and specialized vocabulary, you may wish to clarify the following words at the beginning of the lesson, or to list them on the board and ask the students to see how many they can define from context as they read (in which case, the words could be discussed immediately after the students complete the readings): *extant, trunks, dependencies, harrowed, sickles* or *rice hooks, stubble, sheaves, thrashing, flails, factor, husked, tierces* (a barrel with a liquid capacity of 42 gallons), *precipitated, tidal swamp, secession, expediency, vengeance, harassing, abeyance.*

Working singly or in pairs, the students then write answers to the following questions:

a. What physical evidence exists that can be used to understand the growth and development of rice culture in Georgetown County? How might additional information be obtained?

b. What are the steps involved in rice cultivation, beginning with the preparation of the fields through the packing of rice in barrels for shipment to market?

c. How long did it take the average slave to accomplish one task? Explain what might constitute such a task.

d. Why did the planters believe that slaves were particularly suited to rice cultivation? How was that belief reflected in the population statistics of Georgetown County in the first half of the 18th century?

e. How did the rice planters respond to the onset of the Civil War?

f. How did the slaves respond to the Union capture of Georgetown?

Follow up this exercise with classroom discussion of the students' responses to the questions.

A Rice Plantation

Provide the students with copies of Reading 2, which combines information from the nomination form for Chicora Wood Plantation with material from other sources. The reading describes the house and some of the other buildings typically found on a rice plantation. The focus is on the period during which Robert F. W. Allston owned the plantation. Allston inherited Chicora Wood upon his father's death in 1819 and, while he owned several other plantations, preferred to live there when he could. Allston died during the Civil War. Although his wife Adele was forced to give up most of the family lands during Reconstruction, she managed to retain Chicora Wood Plantation and lived there until her death in 1896.

Ask the students to read "Chicora Wood Plantation" and then to write the answers to the following questions:

a. When was Chicora Wood built?

b. What are its main architectural features? In what ways did its designer take into account the climate of the Georgetown region?

c. What kinds of activities do the names of the plantation buildings suggest? Can you think of any buildings not listed that a typical plantation might have?

d. In 1850 the average yield of a rice plantation in the Georgetown area was 300,000 pounds; in 1860 the average yield had risen to 500,000 pounds. What do these figures tell you about Allston's probable wealth?

e. Allston was an important figure in 19th-century South Carolina. Like Thomas Jefferson, he held conflicting values and beliefs. What were these? Can you explain how he could reconcile such seemingly opposite beliefs?

Visual Evidence

With the students, examine the four photographs of plantation buildings. Ask them to write a brief but precise description of what they see (for example, "there

are two sets of outdoor stairs to the house; there is a bell under a small roof beside the smallest building"). Using Reading 2 and photos 1–4 as data, the students should draw a sketch of where they think the buildings might be located on the site of a typical plantation.

Next, have the students examine the drawing of Mansfield Plantation—whose layout is typical—and compare it to their own sketches. Ask the students to consider why they may have made different placement choices for some of the buildings. (It is not unusual for students to place the slave quarters to the rear of the big house; in the case of early Georgetown County, much travel was by river so guests arrived at both the "front" and the "rear" of the house. For this reason, most slave quarters were placed off to one side. The rice mill and chimney are somewhat obvious, but students might not guess that the temple-like Greek Revival structure was the kitchen. Explain that the kitchen was usually located some distance from the house to avoid both cooking heat and the possibility of fire.)

The type of slave cabin pictured is known as a single pen, meaning a room-size structure that is usually 16 or 18 feet by 16 feet. Sometimes a loft is reached by ladder and used for storage or as a sleeping room for children. That would seem to be the case with this cabin, which also appears to have a small shed addition.

Putting It All Together

Briefly review the importance of rice cultivation to antebellum South Carolina's economy and the way of life that economy supported. Then have the students try to "enter" this historic period by taking part in one of the following activities.

Laying Out a Plantation

The students examine the photographs and the drawing, keeping in mind what they have read about rice culture and Chicora Wood Plantation. They then draw a sketch map showing how they would have laid out a plantation if they had been the architect and landscape designer; for example, neither reading included information on how people on the plantation obtained their food at a time when travel was difficult. How would the students take that into consideration? Where would they have placed the big house and the slave cabins in relation to the rice fields? The students should then compare sketches and award honors to the most practical and the most aesthetically pleasing plans.

Interviewing Plantation Residents

The students divide into teams of three. One member of the team pretends to be a newspaper reporter from a northern city who has come to interview people living on a plantation similar to Chicora Wood. The other two students pretend to be children their own age living on the plantation—either a child of the owner or of a slave. The reporter interviews the two about their daily lives and records their responses.

Researching a Community's Beginnings

The students research the economic base of their own community as it was being established. Was the economy based on a single agricultural product? An early industry? In short, why did people settle in the region? In most communities, local historians have put together pamphlets or books describing the genesis of the town or city. State histories can also be useful. Newspapers often put out anniversary issues that tell much about the early history of a town or region. Local and state libraries and archives contain useful sources.

Visiting the Sites

Chicora Wood, Keithfield, and Mansfield plantations are private residences and are not open to the public. Contact the Rice Museum, Box 902, Georgetown, South Carolina 29442, for more information on the history of rice production.

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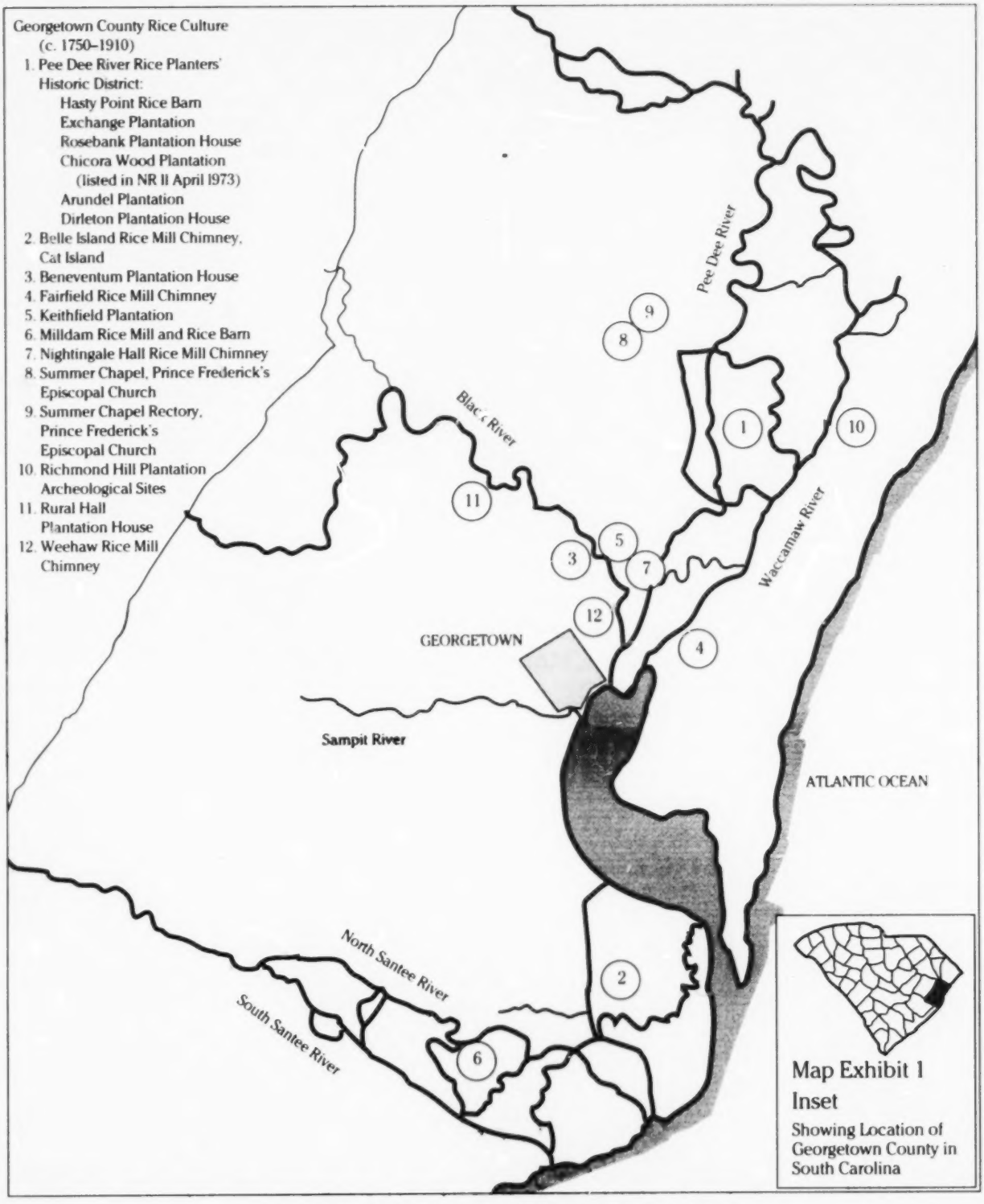
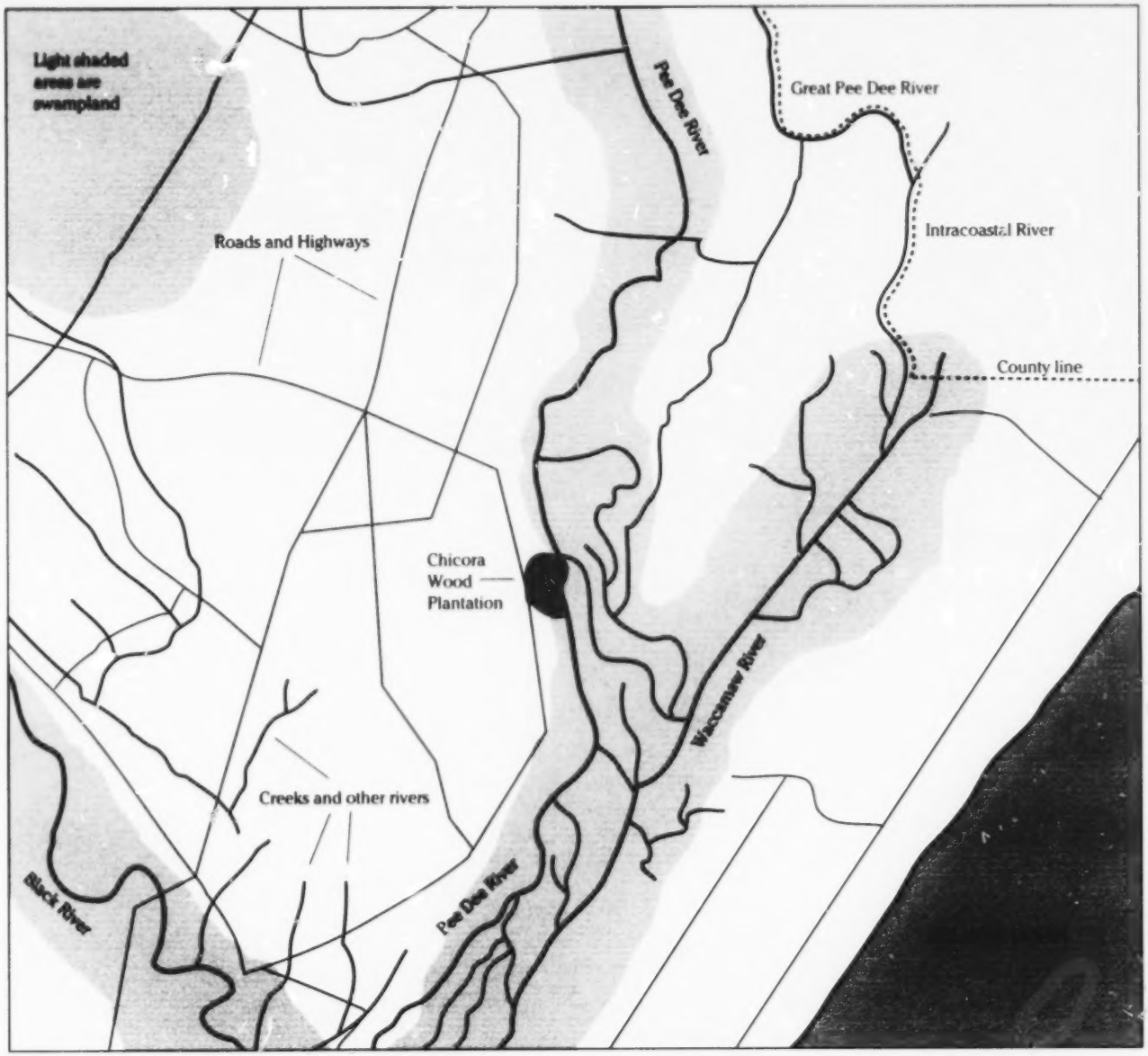
Map Exhibit 1


Georgetown County Rice Culture
(c. 1750–1910)
1. Pee Dee River Rice Planters' Historic District:
Hasty Point Rice Barn
Exchange Plantation
Rosebank Plantation House
Chicora Wood Plantation
(listed in NR II April 1973)
Arundel Plantation
Dirleton Plantation House
2. Belle Island Rice Mill Chimney, Cat Island
3. Beneventum Plantation House
4. Fairfield Rice Mill Chimney
5. Keithfield Plantation
6. Milldam Rice Mill and Rice Barn
7. Nightingale Hall Rice Mill Chimney
8. Summer Chapel, Prince Frederick's Episcopal Church
9. Summer Chapel Rectory, Prince Frederick's Episcopal Church
10. Richmond Hill Plantation Archeological Sites
11. Rural Hall Plantation House
12. Weehaw Rice Mill Chimney
Pee Dee River
Black River
Waccamaw River
GEORGETOWN
Sampit River
ATLANTIC OCEAN
North Santee River
South Santee River
Map Exhibit 1
Inset
Showing Location of Georgetown County in South Carolina

Boundaries of the Pee Dee River Rice Planters' Historic District

Map Exhibit 1 was adapted from a sketch in the National Register of Historic Places nomination file for Chicora Wood Plantation.

Map Exhibit 2



Chicora Wood Plantation and Surrounding Wetlands

Map Exhibit 2 was adapted from a map of Georgetown County prepared by the South Carolina State Highway Department.

Reading 1: Georgetown County Rice Culture (c. 1750–1910)

"During the summer months, Rice crops waved over fields of thousands of acres in extent, and upon a surface so level and unbroken, that in casting one's eye up and down the river, there was not for miles, an intervening object to obstruct the sight."

G. S. S., "Sketches of the Santee River," *The American Monthly Magazine*, October 1836.

"The ordinary plantation task is easily accomplished. Men and women are all engaged together in the planting, cultivation, and harvesting of the Crop, but in the preparation of the Rice Land, as ditching, embanking, etc. the *men* are alone engaged with the spade. It is customary *(and never objected to)* for the more active and industrious hands to assist those who are slower and more tardy in finishing their daily task."

James Ritchie Sparkman to Benjamin Allston, 1858.

"The Proprietor wishes the Overseer to understand that his first object is to be, the care and well being of the negroes. The Proprietor never can or will excuse any cruelty, or want of care towards the negroes [but] it is absolutely necessary to maintain obedience, order, and discipline; to see that the tasks are punctually, and carefully performed."

Rules on the Rice Estate of P. C. Weston.

During the almost two hundred years when South Carolina led the nation in rice production, no other area of the colony, and later, the state, grew rice with more success and in such abundance as did Georgetown County.

Many physical evidences of rice culture in the county have disappeared due to both the passage of time and modern development along the coast. Many resources still remain, however, which help to illustrate the growth and development of rice culture in Georgetown County from c. 1750 to c. 1910. These extant resources include such structures as plantation houses, slave cabins, rice barns, rice mills, and rice-mill chimneys. In addition, agricultural features associated with rice cultivation including canals, dikes, and trunks, have generally been retained and maintained since production ceased in the area.

Archeological evidence is an especially important source of information about places such as the Georgetown rice plantations, because so many of the people who contributed to the productivity and stability of these plantations left no written records. Fortunately, there is great potential for such evidence since the slave economy of plantations such as Chicora Wood required a total community. A typical rice plantation included rows of slave houses, an overseer's house, and other dependencies in addition to the main plantation house, the remains of which may be archeologically preserved.

Rice cultivation was an exacting enterprise, which required strict attention to detail and an ability to adapt to changing conditions. Each step of the planting, growing, and harvesting process was crucial to the success or failure of the year's crop. In the spring, the land was harrowed and plowed in preparation for planting sometime around the first of April. Rice seed was sown by hand using a small hoe. The first flooding of the field, the *sprout flow*, barely covered the seed and lasted only until the grain sprouted. The water was then drained to keep the delicate sprout from floating away, and the rice was allowed to grow for approximately three weeks. Around the first of May any grass growing among the sprouts was weeded by hoe and the field again was flooded to cover just the tops of the plants. This *point flow* lasted a few days,

Reading 1 was compiled from the National Register multiple-property documentation form, "Georgetown Rice Culture, c. 1750–c. 1910" (Georgetown County, South Carolina), by J. Tracy Power, National Register historian, and Sherry Piland, architectural historian, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1987.

after which time the water was gradually drained until it half covered the plants. It remained at this level—the *long flow*—until the rice was strong enough to stand. More weeding followed, the water was slowly drained completely off the field, and the ground around the plants was hoed to encourage the growth and extension of the roots. After some three weeks, the field was hoed and weeded again, at which time—around mid-June or the first of July—the *lay-by flow* was added and gradually increased until the plants were completely submerged. This flow was kept on the field for about two months with fresh water periodically introduced and stagnant water run off by the tidal flow through the trunks.

Rice planted in the first week of April was usually ready for harvesting by the first week of September. After the lay-by flow was withdrawn, just before the grain was fully ripe, the rice was cut with large sickles known as rice hooks and laid on the ground on the stubble. After it had dried overnight, the cut rice was tied into sheaves and taken by flatboat to the threshing yard. In the colonial period, threshing was most often done by beating the stalks with flails. If the rice was to be sold rough, it was then shipped to the factor (agent); otherwise, it was husked and cleaned—again, usually by hand. By the mid-19th century most of the larger plantations operated pounding and/or threshing mills which were driven by steam engines. After the rice had been prepared, it was packed in barrels, or *tierces*, and shipped to the market at Georgetown or Charleston.

Work on an antebellum rice plantation was divided into tasks. Each field hand was given a task—usually nine or ten hours' hard work—or a fraction of a task to complete each day according to his or her ability. For example, one plantation on the Black River established cutting and carrying a quarter of an acre of rice from the field as one task. In 1859 a plantation on the Pee Dee River held 52 slaves responsible for $47\frac{1}{2}$ tasks; 41 had full tasks and 11 had fractions of tasks to perform.

The planting, cultivation, harvesting, and preparation of rice required an immense labor force which could be taught the steps of the process. Slavery provided that force, and the growth of the rice culture precipitated a dramatic increase in the numbers of slaves owned by South Carolinians before the American Revolution. Throughout the first half of the 18th century, more than 85 percent of the population in the Georgetown District were slaves. Planters believed that slaves were particularly suited for rice cultivation for two reasons: rice was grown in some areas of Africa and there was evidence that some slaves were familiar with the methods of cultivation practiced there. It also was thought that the slaves, by virtue of their racial characteristics, were better able than white laborers to withstand the extreme heat and humidity of the tidal swamps and therefore would be more productive workers.

As the sectional tensions between the North and the South increased in the 1850s, the secession of South Carolina from a union in which slavery was threatened was considered by many of her leading citizens to be the best course of action available. Most of the Georgetown District rice planters agreed in theory with the right of secession, and even if some of them came to doubt the expediency of the South's withdrawal from the Union, many served in the Confederate army.

By the time federal naval and land forces finally captured Georgetown in February 1865, few planters were left to hear the announcement of the abolition of slavery in the area. The slaves were told by federal soldiers and sailors—many of whom were themselves freedmen—that they were free. They celebrated not only joyously but with a vengeance, drinking freely, looting their former plantations, and harassing their former masters. Jane Pringle, from the White House plantation on the Pee Dee River, wrote Adele Petigru Allston, widow of Robert F. W. Allston, "Your negroes I hear are perfectly in-subordinate. . . . The blacks are masters of the situation, this is a conquered country and for the moment law and order are in abeyance."

Student Reading 2: Chicora Wood Plantation

The plantation was begun sometime between 1732 and 1736, with the house built before 1819. The house is a two-story, gabled-roof building resting on a high brick basement. The walls are sheathed with clapboards; the gable ends have cornice returns running full width, and corners finished with flat corner boards. All windows on the upper floors are nine-over-nine, with pointed arch windows in the gable ends. There is a later roof dormer with a Palladian window. A one-story porch extends around three sides of the house, supported by wooden Doric columns. The entrance stairs are double entry at the ground level, turning at a landing and continuing in a straight run to the porch level. The porch has been enclosed at the left and is screened at either end. The high basement is recessed behind the porch and screened with latticework. Original louvered shutters have wrought-iron strap hinges and pintles. The nine-panel entrance door, with original hardware, is framed with sidelights and a transom. The window frames are flat panels with a beaded inner face, and the door frame has square corner blocks.

The plantation complex includes a number of excellent outbuildings: the original kitchen, smoke house, later carriage house, wash house, and later farm buildings. The kitchen building is a one-story Greek Revival temple form that is of great architectural interest with its huge cooking fireplace and the original interior mortise-and-tenon framing. The door has a latch string and wooden latch with iron hinges, and the windows are solid panels below with a round-headed sash above. The old plantation bell is supported by a conveyor screw salvaged from the rice mill. The rice mill complex, one of the most interesting remaining examples of its type, includes the mill and shipping house.

R. F. W. Allston was the most notable planter on the Pee Dee River. Chicora Wood served as home plantation for Allston's network of rice plantations, which produced 840,000 pounds of rice in 1850 and 1,500,000 pounds by 1860. By this later date he owned seven plantations along the Pee Dee, with more than 4,000 acres in rice land and another 9,500 acres of pasture and timber lands. The slave labor force that produced rice increased from 401 in 1850 to 630 by 1860.

Allston was educated at West Point and also trained in the law. He served in the South Carolina House of Representatives and the state senate for 24 years and was governor from 1856 to 1858. He claimed his political creed to be that of Thomas Jefferson—strict constructionism and "a plain, honest, common-sense reading of the Constitution," which for him meant that both slavery and its nullification were constitutional. Like Jefferson, he worked for many reforms—decent care for the deaf, blind, and insane; better treatment of the remaining Catawba Indians; and free public education for all children who were not slaves. Allston shared his innovative methods of cultivation in well-known agricultural journals. A collection of his papers entitled *The South Carolina Rice Planter* is considered to be among the most informative publications on this phase of southern agriculture. Allston's daughter, Elizabeth Waties Allston Pringle, continued the family's literary tradition with two popular books, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood* and *A Woman Rice Planter*.

Reading 2 was compiled from the National Register nomination form, "Chicora Wood Plantation" (Georgetown County, South Carolina), by Nancy R. Ruhf, Historic Preservation Division, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, and Russell Wright, A.I.P., 1972.

Photo 1

Photo 2

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Photo 3

Photo 4

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PHOTO CAPTIONS

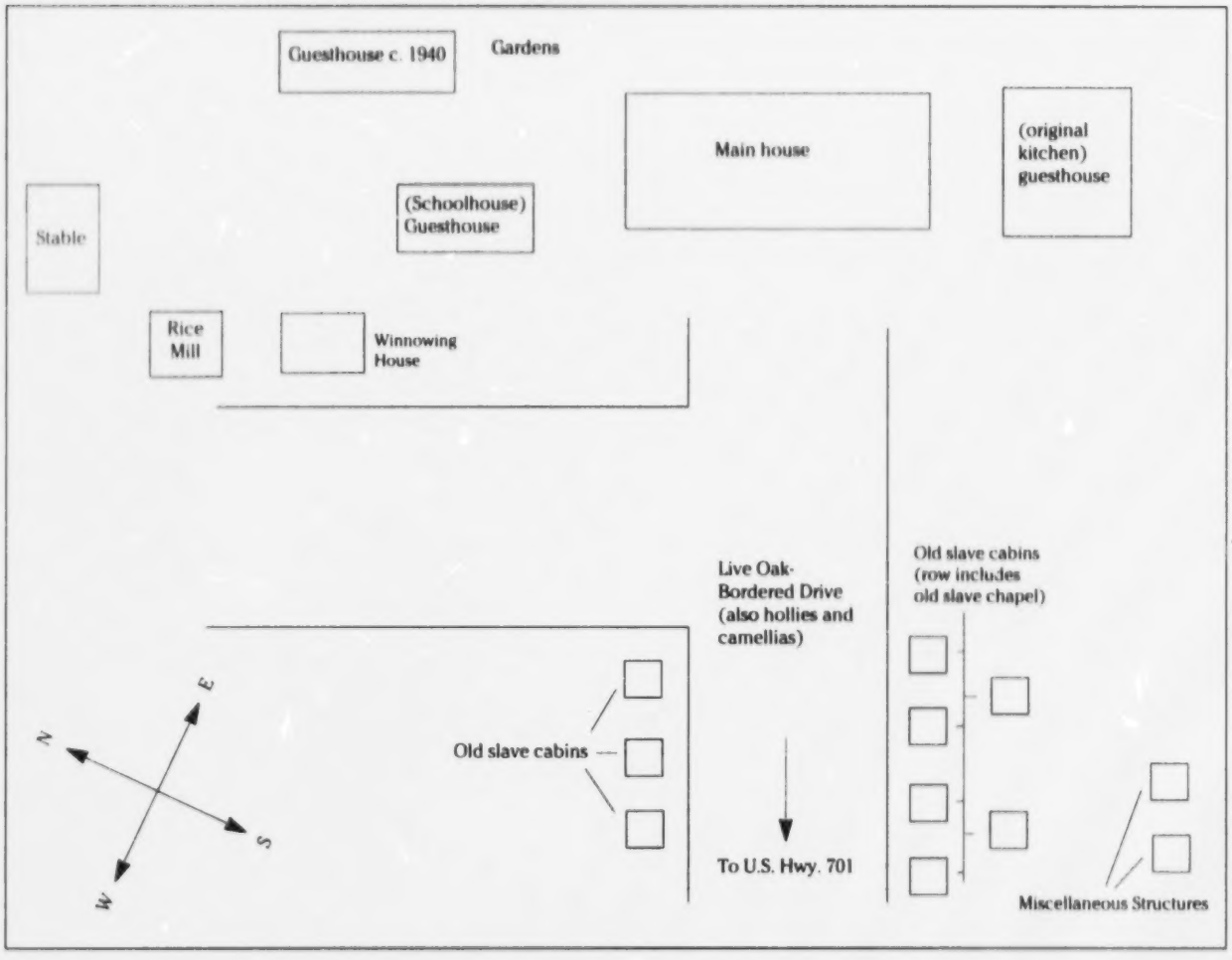
Photo 1. Main House, Chicora Wood Plantation, Georgetown vicinity, South Carolina. (E. Kirby-Smith, 1981)

Photo 2. Kitchen, Chicora Wood Plantation. (Gary Wood, 1972)

Photo 3. Rice Mill, Chicora Wood Plantation. (C.N. Bayless, no date)

Photo 4. Slave House, Keithfield Plantation, Georgetown vicinity, South Carolina. (Sherry Piland, 1987)

Mansfield Plantation



This drawing was adapted from the National Register of Historic Places documentation form, "Mansfield Plantation" (Georgetown County, South Carolina), by Kathy McNulty, regional preservation planner, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1977.